

WONNANGATTA FIRE RISK

This is a warning to all people going into the Wonnangatta Valley in the Alpine National Park on the Labour Day weekend 11 - 13 March 2006.

Parks Victoria has stopped grazing and allowed grass fuel in the Wonnangatta Valley to build up way past dangerous levels. There is a real risk to the safety of visitors to the area being trapped with little chance of escape in a fast moving fire racing down the valley.

On Tuesday and Wednesday 7 - 8 March 2006, two bushfire experts visited the area at the request of Mountain Cattleman and members of the Licola Fire Brigade. David Packham has been a bushfire scientist for over 40 years including 8 years as Supervising Meteorologist for bushfire weather with the Bureau of Meteorology. Rod Incoll was a former Chief Fire Officer with the old Forests Commission.

The two experts along with senior cattlemen, the daughter and grand daughter of one of the previous owners of Wonnangatta Station, an elderly stockman who started work there when he was 14 and the Captain of the Licola Fire Brigade, all made an inspection of the area.

Fuel levels on the river flats and surrounding valley were assessed and the potential of a fire breaking out with fuel loads of over 10 tonnes/ha of dead dry grass on the flats was estimated. The results were truly frightening.

With 40 kilometre per hour wind gusts and 39 degree temperatures, as well as 10% humidity forecast for Sunday 12 March, a fire on the flats would race down the valley with a flame height of more than 30 meters travelling at 3 metres a second. The fire that killed the 5 fire fighters at Linton in 1998 on a CFA tanker was estimated to have an intensity of 10 megawatts per meter (MW/meter). A fire on the Wonnangatta flats could produce an intensity of 54 MW/meter. This is totally un survivable to anyone trapped in the fire front, even in vehicles. The sides of the valley around the flats has maximum fuel accumulations which is around 30 tonnes/ha which would cause a full crown fire (burning above treetops) with an intensity of 100 MW/meter travelling at 2.2 metres per second making escape for many from the area along the rough 4WD tracks near on impossible. A comment made by David Packham was the thing that most amazed him with the place was that nobody had already been killed there.

The north - south direction of the valley greatly increases the fire risk. A hot northerly wind (as forecast for Sunday, going into Monday), would roar down this valley. The many river gums have a huge accumulation of candle bark which is the very worst material to produce spot fires. A fire starting at the head of the valley would rapidly throw spots with the potential to light up the whole area in a very short time filling the place with smoke and blocking all escape to the hundreds of people who visit the area on a long weekend.

Up until Parks Victoria took over Wonnangatta it had always been a safe place. The 1939 and 1965 fires did not get into the valley. Because of this reason little is known about localised fire behaviour, it could be far worse than outlined.

The only place in the area with any hope of survival from a hot fire is under a woollen blanket inside vehicles in the elm forest just south of the homestead, though survival even there could not be guaranteed. This wont be for much longer as the trees are infested with elm beetles and it is unlikely Parks Victoria will care enough to address the issue.

For a long time Parks Victoria have not been answering letters from the Licola CFA Captain on the risk to lives in campsites in the Alpine National Park along the Wellington River. Parks have not returned phone calls on the Wonnangatta fire risks this weekend either and refuse to close the area. Parks intend to increase patrols during the long weekend. This will cause some improvement stopping campfires escaping, but if a fire does break out, all this is likely to do is increase the number of body bags needing to be carried out. The question of where OH&S stands with Parks employees put into such a situation needs to be addressed.

The serious risks in Wonnangatta have been known for sometime. Up until this long weekend the grass has been green enough to retard a fire and the weather forecast has been for cool conditions, unlike the extreme conditions coming this weekend.

It is unlikely any of the relevant Government agencies involved are going to address these issues. It is unfortunate our very responsible and competent Police have no power to close the park as this solely rests with Parks Victoria who created the problem in the first place. It would seem Parks Victoria have an appalling record of placing political agendas far ahead of human safety and exercising a duty of care.

On a visit to the area on January 10, 2006 to observe the cattleman's protest the Captain of the Licola Fire Brigade was not able to get answers from Park Rangers as to how they would address the fire risk. Rangers were also not able to give any evacuation plans for the hundreds of people who frequent the area. The worst aspect was the Rangers even refused to witness measurements of the extreme fuel build up beside where their own vehicle was parked.

L.Ralph Barraclough
Licola Friday 10 March 2006

Ralph Barraclough is airing community concerns for safe and responsible management of public land, he is also Captain of the Licola Fire Brigade.